

Child Homelessness in U.S. Reaches Historic High, Report Says

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(Abridged from) *Newsweek*, 18 November 2014

One out of every 30 children in the U.S. experienced homelessness last year. That makes nearly 2.5 million children who, in 2013, lived in shelters, on the streets, in cars, on campgrounds or doubled up with other families in tight quarters, often moving from one temporary solution to another, according to “America’s Youngest Outcasts,” a report published Monday by the the National Center on Family Homelessness. “As a nation of wealth and opportunity [one in 30 children] is not something we should tolerate,” Carmela DeCandia, director of the National Center on Family Homelessness, tells *Newsweek*. “We haven’t been paying attention,” she says, and “we need to before the goal becomes out of reach.”

The report found that children are homeless in every county and state across the country, in rural areas, towns, and major cities. Numbers in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York are high, DeCandia says, but rural homelessness is also a problem, in areas where support services may be more difficult to access. Researchers found that a majority of the families counted consisted of a young single mother with two children, usually under the age of 6.

The report identifies six major causes contributing to the unprecedented rate of child homelessness: high poverty rates, lack of affordable housing, racial disparities, challenges of single parenting, domestic violence and other traumatic experiences, and the lingering effects of the recession. These highly vulnerable groups are still suffering from the recession’s effects, according to DeCandia.

In the short term, homeless children are hungry and sick more often, and worry about their family’s situation and future, according to the report. “They’re not just losing a house, a shelter. They’re losing their sense of place, of community,” DeCandia tells *Newsweek*. In the long term, according to the report, homelessness can have a “devastating” effect on children, leading to “changes in brain architecture that can interfere with learning, emotional self-regulation, cognitive skills, and social relationships.” Children who have experienced homelessness and frequently changed schools tend to fall behind, Lesley says, and are more likely to drop out of school before they graduate.

Children are resilient, Duffield says, but time is of the essence. “If you intervene early, the brain is plastic, you can change the trajectory,” she says. But if developmental delays are not addressed early, they can have a lasting impact. “These children today are going to be the chronically homeless adults” of tomorrow, she says, if they don’t receive the help they need.

The report presents a slew of possible solutions to curb child homelessness, including: safe and affordable housing; education and employment opportunities for parents; comprehensive assessment of every family member’s needs; trauma-informed care; identification, prevention, and treatment of depression in mothers; parenting supports for mothers; and research to identify evidence-based programs and services.

“One of the first things is we need to be honest about definitions,” Duffield says. “[The federal] housing agency focuses on a very limited group that does not include most youth and families.” DeCandia explains that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) relies on a “point-in-time” count conducted annually on one night in January that tallies the number of homeless people in shelters and on the streets. It does not include families and children crowding into a basement in another family’s house, staying at a motel, or constantly moving from one makeshift housing solution to another. The DOE numbers and those compiled by “America’s Youngest Outcasts” include the second, much larger group of families and children struggling to find safe, steady and affordable housing.

DeCandia warns that there is no time to spare. “Kids really can’t wait. They’re developing,” she says. “They can’t wait for us to get it together.”